

The Cardboard Collector

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Though relatives had often marveled at my resemblance to my grandma, I could not see the similarities. So when this essay assignment called for documenting a piece of my family history and analyzing it in terms of larger social structures, I wanted to explore my grandma's childhood to compare with my own and see where the resemblances might begin and end. However, in the process of writing this essay, I encountered unexpected challenges with understanding generational, cultural, and even linguistic differences. I realized I could not center my documentary work about my grandma without having grounded my interpretations through my perspective, which is why I framed her story within mine. I also consciously used Cantonese pinyin transcription—unitalicized—to de-emphasize its “foreignness” from my background. Interwoven with structures of race, class, and culture, my grandma's story boils down to one important lesson: do not take the smallest, most overlooked gifts in life for granted. In understanding this, I finally see that my resemblance of my grandma begins here.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Lisa wrote this essay in response to the final assignment in my advanced composition (UWP 101) class: the family history paper. The assignment asks students to draw on both primary and secondary research to explore some aspect of their family history and place that story in a larger social context. It's a challenge to figure out how to narrow the focus, structure the narrative, and weave in the secondary research. In writing about her grandmother, Lisa tells a beautifully crafted story that captures the personality of her grandmother and also educates the reader about the Second Sino-Japanese War. The secondary research is woven in seamlessly with the dramatic stories of her grandmother's childhood evading the oc-

cupying Japanese army in rural China. One of the things I most admire about the essay is its dramatic storytelling: the opening anecdote is a terrific example, vividly bringing to life a scene from Lisa's own childhood, helping her grandmother organize piles of cardboard. In this brief scene, through carefully chosen details and snippets of Cantonese, Lisa brings her grandmother to life, and we are hooked.

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

I picked up the bags gingerly. “These?” I tried to mask my disgust as I held the green newspaper bags at arm’s length.

My grandma nodded. “Yuhng dói bāau ge jí bāan le,” she said, handing me pieces of cardboard, which I took reluctantly.

I did as I was told, organizing the broken-down cereal boxes and Amazon boxes into a pile. The sooner I finished, the sooner I could get back to watching that episode. I tied the individual ends of the green newspaper bags together to form a long chain and wrapped the cardboard pile with it as I would a ribbon on a present—with sloppy ease.

My grandma tasked and, in a matter of seconds, undid my work; when she lifted the pile by the chain of newspaper bags, pieces of cardboard fell lopsided onto the stained ground of our old basement. She gave me a look that said, “you can’t do anything right,” and told me to sit down and watch how she did it.

Glumly, I watched as her nifty fingers untied my knots and reorganized the cardboard pile. She towered over the foot-high pile and straddled it with her legs to keep them in their place as she rewrapped the green bags. “Like this,” she said in Cantonese. “Next time you do this, you will do a better job.” She lifted the pile triumphantly. All the pieces of cardboard were neatly tied down.

“Why do I even need to do this?” I whined.

She did not answer me for a long time, focusing instead on repeating the process again. Finally when she finished another pile, my grandma declared, “Chē léih hó yíh jing chàih-ah ma.”

I scoffed. “Why would we ever need these piles of cardboard in the car?” To wipe our feet? To fortify our already-dented 2004 Toyota Camry? Is this another part of weird Chinese culture?

Behind her glasses, my grandma’s beady eyes glared at me. “To *sell*,” she said bluntly in Cantonese, and suddenly I was confronted with a

question I never before had to ask: *Are we that poor?*

This time, I was the one who could not answer for a long while. We most certainly were not *that* poor and desperate to be selling cardboard at recycling centers . . . were we? I had to ask.

Though my grandma responded immediately, she did not directly answer my question. Instead, she needed me to understand that I could not—*must* not—“lohng fai” (be wasteful).

I could almost laugh. It is one thing to not be wasteful, but it is a completely different thing to wallow in waste in order to achieve those means. Is this another attempt for the young and naive to learn from the old and wise? “We don’t need to do this,” I defiantly said.

My grandma sat on the floor across from me and, much to my surprise, agreed. Patiently, she told me that we must take advantage of all our access and privilege, no matter how insignificant they appear. Before I could laugh at her—what nonsense she was spewing!—I was reminded of her past experiences with trauma and precarity that had informed her way of living.



My grandma, pictured standing behind her parents, with her older brother on her left.

My grandma was born to middle-class parents in Hong Kong in the midst of the Second Sino-Japanese War, otherwise known as the War of Resistance. As she neared her first birthday, the Japanese invaded the region, forcing her parents, older brother, grandmother, and *mūi jái*, a servant girl of about nineteen, to flee to her ancestral home in Kaiping, a village in China’s Guangdong Province, until the war ended in 1945 when she was about six years old.

“China is much more spacious than Hong Kong, so it’s a better hiding place,” she had insisted, but I surmised that the move back to mainland China really meant to foster solidarity with the entire family, physically and spiritually, in their final moments, whenever that may soon be.

The Second Sino-Japanese War started from an accumulation of tension between China and Japan over the rights of Manchuria, located in present-day northeastern China. In the 1930s, Manchuria was mostly populated by the Chinese, yet the land was mostly controlled by Japan, suggesting that the Chinese, despite the vastness of their land, were not as powerful. To dispel this rumor, China built new railroads that surrounded already-existing Japanese railroad tracks. When one of Japan’s tracks was unexpectedly bombed, the Japanese accused the Chinese and, as compensation, seized part of their land (“Second Sino-Japanese War”). China continually denied the destruction of the tracks, fueling the escalating tension between the two countries, until at last, the Japanese invaded most of China and Hong Kong. As a result, war ensued. Through tactics of terror and violence, Japanese soldiers instilled fear and anti-Japanese sentiment among many Chinese, who not only fought back physically, but also resisted in other, subtle ways.

Even as a toddler, my grandma had understood danger. And with that sense of danger came fear; she had witnessed firsthand the brutality of the Japanese soldiers. Her distress was not appeased within the confines of her home either; every night, her parents would usher her and her older brother into the innermost room of the house and test them over and over again the protocols they had drilled into them until the children would cry. Even now, my grandma could recall.

When the villagers saw the smoke wisp out of the chimneys from the buildings the Japanese had seized, they cautiously relaxed; it signaled that the Japanese soldiers were preoccupied with cooking and eating. My grandma and her older brother were allowed to play with the other children, but always within the sights of at least two adults. However, as soon as the sky was clear blue again, silent chaos would ensue. Adults and children ran everywhere, trying to hide quickly and quietly. My grandma and her older brother were to stay put, and the adults were to come and get them.

The family would immediately split up. My grandma’s parents and mūi jái would take her older brother and flee in one direction, while

her grandmother would carry her in the opposite direction, toward the bamboo fields that were so dense that light rarely shone through. My grandma could not recall how long she had hidden between the bamboo shafts—she had always fallen asleep on her grandmother’s back—but they soon became as familiar to her as the dreadful possibility that she might not ever see her family again.

One day, their plans had gone awry. *One of the Japanese soldiers caught our mūi jái as she was running away with your baby cousin in her arms*, her grandmother whispered to her that night when they were safe. *Thank goodness she was so calm and composed when she put the infant down and obeyed the soldier’s orders!* He had only wanted her to carry his food to their building—she had returned within an hour, picked up the baby from where he had been left, and walked back home as if nothing had happened.

My grandma could laugh humorlessly about the courage of her family’s mūi jái now. “We all thought she was going to be”—a pause—“done for.” Killed. Or worse—raped.

Neither atrocity was uncommon; in fact, through word of mouth, the Chinese warned their neighbors, pointing out the tendencies of certain soldiers to loot homes or commit unmentionable crimes against humanity. However, most of these warnings could only come through whispers; though it had been approximately two years since the Rape of Nanjing was publicized, widely circulated news and stories free from propaganda were scarce. Chinese history specialist Laura Pozzi explains that “the scarcity of paper and the interruption of the distribution network made the circulation of books and magazines problematic” (127). Though Pozzi makes this remark in relation to the relative absence of children’s literature during the war, the paper scarcity shows that the learning of information was indeed rare. Another reason for the inaccessibility of public news was that though theft, death, and rape were expected occurrences of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese people did not know of their magnitude and frequency because of the ineffectiveness of reporting by Chinese journalists during the war. “Most Chinese reporters were unwilling to depict their fellow countrymen as merely helpless victims of the Japanese attack” (Coble 382). The ineffectiveness was not because of the fear of reporting, but rather because of journalists’ agenda to boost Chinese morale in the form of propaganda. Though some Chinese saw the insufficient news as “avoid[ing] . . . responsibility”

(Coble 383), many others, including cartoonists and media workers, also committed themselves to encouraging people's spirits. But this encouragement meant a significant lack of information; in fact, it was not until after the war that China began reporting the tolls the country had suffered (Coble 382).

As such, because of the lack of verified information from the government or the media, my grandma and her family held any type of gossip close to heart and mind. In fact, the whispers from their community saved their financial fate. In a small village like Kaiping, locking the doors to their homes was redundant and potentially dangerous—Japanese soldiers constantly broke down doors to monitor, loot, and rob Chinese villagers. Operating through a regime of fear prompted many, including my grandma's family, to safeguard their money, as it was their only means of physically surviving the war; the money was not just to pay for food, but also to bribe, if it came down to it.

My grandma recalled with a dreamy expression that her grandmother would "bind lucky Chinese coins very tightly, wrapping neatly tied grass around both the outside perimeter and through the square hole in the coin middles." She continued: "She told my brother and I to wrap the small bundle of coins around with some leaves, and then we started digging a hole in the fields to hide the money. We didn't have shovels or any tools but our hands, so we dug so deep that I could stand in it and my head would not be visible over the top. Our fingernails had so much dirt in them it took a week to get them completely clean!" Then my grandma's eyes hardened. "I don't know how, but the Japanese found them and took the whole stash. We had been very careful, but I guess we just weren't careful enough." She sighed bitterly.

Hiding money became a general practice during the war. The Japanese actively sought Chinese money not only for the purposes of getting rich and depriving the Chinese of their resources, but also to scrutinize hidden messages within Chinese bank notes. These messages, often obscene pictures that mocked the Japanese, were yet another way to foster morale and unity within the Chinese population, showing solidarity against Japanese oppression. In order to avoid getting caught, rebellious Chinese artists frequently used ominous animals like wolves and turtles to depict their distaste for the enemy (Hatton and Lindberg). On the sides of a 100 yuan banknote, for example, are discrete wolf heads, drawn subtly to symbolize the greed of the Japanese.



100 Yuan Banknote, China, 1942 (Hatton and Lindberg, <https://americanhistory.si.edu>).

Hiding money was just one of the countless noncommittal duties typically expected of children during the War of Resistance. Pozzi contends that the war “altered expectations of children, who were often considered to be little adults with responsibilities” (112). Indeed, at a young age, my grandma and her older brother were unusually mature. For instance, when her brother discovered that their grandmother’s stash of coins was stolen, he had conversed with neighbors to find out how to effectively hide their money from the Japanese soldiers. He and my grandma taught themselves to wrap and hide rolls of Chinese customs gold units inside food like blocks of cheese, which the Japanese soldiers would not take when they looted homes. However, this was only a temporary solution; the food had to be replaced every few weeks at most, for the food around the money would rot and mold. But it was a small price to pay compared to losing all of their money to the Japanese. Though the family often went hungry, they successfully protected most of their money from the soldiers due to the quick thinking and maturity of my grandma and her older brother.

The War of Resistance ended when my grandma was about six years old. With help from the United States, Chinese soldiers had more sufficient training and more resources to bomb and defend themselves against Japan (“Second Sino-Japanese War”). In September 1945, Japan surrendered and retreated, which came as a huge relief for the Chinese government. The Chinese people, on the other hand, did not share the same sentiment, as many were traumatized. The Japanese withdrawal was

synonymously associated with the elimination of violence, terror, and loss: “the flag of Japan [had] fl[own] everywhere . . . and the sun image was the color of blood” (Coble 388). Despite the fact that China emerged victorious, the country was left disordered during its recuperation period.

To this day, my grandma still refuses to talk openly about the Japanese and the War of Resistance, but through her actions, she shows that her experiences had significantly changed her life. My grandma’s quick thinking and maturity continued to manifest throughout her adult life, especially when she immigrated from Guangzhou—she had moved there shortly after the Japanese retreat in 1945—to the United States. Once in the States, however, my grandma struggled to find work and connections, especially because of the language barrier. No sooner did she start working as a seamstress in a sweatshop-like factory when the 1989 San Francisco Earthquake hit, causing extensive damage to her apartment building, and she again found herself in a precarious financial situation. However, this time she was prepared for it; through developed connections within Chinatown, she had learned to save with a bank account. As such, she was successful in recovering some of her damaged household valuables.

In the mid-1990s, my grandma moved once more and settled into a house—the very house in which I would grow up. This time, the move was significantly symbolic; she moved into this house as a homeowner, whereas in the previous times she had moved, she had been searching for security, whether from war or for financial reasons. No, she was not rich now by any means, but stability was what she had sought for most of her life. She has finally attained it.

I understood the distress and trauma that she had endured over the course of her lifetime, most especially during wartime. The War of Resistance taught my grandma that nothing should be taken for granted—not the grass and dirt beneath her feet, not the chatter of neighbors, and certainly not a square block of cheese. Everything that is overlooked in life—including the cardboard and green newspaper bags strewn around my feet—is not to be wasted merely because it is viewed as trash. When “trash” can be used advantageously, it should be; we must not “lohng fai.”

I looked up at my grandma. In the place of a cardboard collector, I instead saw a strong survivor.

I began to tie the ends of the green newspaper bags together.

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